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# Restrictions on “Low” Person agreement in Dutch Specificational Copular Constructions

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## Abstract

Agreement between the verb and its arguments as a predominant phenomenon in language has received major attention in the theoretical literature. One specific aspect under discussion concerns differences between number and person agreement, with the latter being the more restricted one (restricted by Baker’s 2008 SCOPA, by variants of the Person Licensing Condition of Béjar & Rizac 2003, or by multiple agreement see Schütze 2003; Ackema & Neeleman 2018). In this paper we address the restrictions on person agreement with a nominative noun phrase in a low position by investigating a relatively little-discussed configuration, namely specificational copular constructions in Dutch such as *dat de inspiratie voor deze roman niet jij %bent/?is*. We provide data from both a production and a rating study comparing 3/2 person agreement and show that what initially looks like a “person effect” in Dutch turns out to be a pronoun effect.

## 1. Introduction: “Low” Person Agreement and Specificational Copular Clauses

An important set of phenomena that need to be addressed by any theory of agreement relate to differences between person and number agreement. One much-discussed case within Germanic concerns Icelandic structures with dative subjects (DAT-NOM). As illustrated in (1), number agreement with the low nominative is possible, (1a), but person agreement in first or second person is not, see (1b) (Sigurðsson 1996; Taraldsen 1996).<sup>1</sup>

- (1) a. *Henni líkaðu þeir.* ICELANDIC  
her.DAT liked.3.PL they.M.NOM  
‘She liked them.’  
b. \**Henni líkaðir þú.*  
her.DAT liked.2.SG you.2. SG.NOM  
‘She liked you.’

Various proposals have been suggested to account for such contrasts as in (1a) vs. (1b). For Baker (2008) person agreement is an instance of indirect operator-variable binding, a fundamentally different relationship to the Agree relation between a functional head and the (features of) some nominal. Person agreement is the result of a first or second person pronoun being bound by an operator and a Spec,Head relation of the agreement head (T) and the pronoun in its specifier. One

consequence of Baker's approach is that person agreement requires a local specifier-head configuration, while number agreement can obtain "long-distance" (downwards). This restriction on person is known as Baker's (2008) Structural Condition on Person Agreement (SCOPA), see also den Dikken (2014,2019).<sup>2</sup> In Baker's analysis, (1b) is ungrammatical because the nominative is not local enough for the person probe. Alternatively, it has been proposed that the dative intervenes for person agreement and blocks agreement with the low nominative 1st and 2nd person (henceforth 1/2P) pronouns in (1b). Therefore (1b) is impossible. Additionally, these pronouns need to be licensed by agreement so there is no grammatical version of the sentence in (1b) (see Boeckx 2000; Béjar and Rezac 2003; Anagnostopoulou 2003; Béjar and Rezac 2003; Preminger 2011; 2014 among others). Finally, others have argued that the restrictions arise due to multiple agreement of the verb with both the dative (which is always 3<sup>rd</sup> person) and the nominative, however, this agreement cannot be morphologically expressed in a single slot. (1b) is ungrammatical because there is no syncretic form of 3sg (dative) and 2sg (see Sigurðsson 1996; Schütze 2003; Hartmann and Heycock 2018a).

In this paper we examine a less discussed case where there is a "low nominative" that may be agreed with, namely Specificational Copular Clauses (SCCs) such as the following:

(2) *Zij zei dat...*

DUTCH

she said that

a. ... *het grootste probleem haar zus was*.

... the biggest problem her sister was

'... the biggest problem was her sister.'

b. ... *het grootste probleem haar ouders waren*.

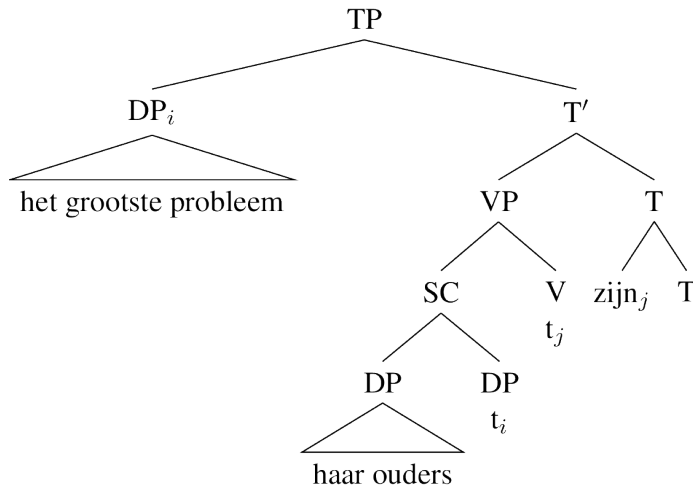
... the biggest problem her parents were'

'... the biggest problem was her parents.'

SCCs differ from predicational copular clauses such as *Peter is a genius*, in which the referential subject is assigned the property expressed by the second noun phrase. SCCs involve a non-referential noun phrase in a high position (DP1), which provides 'a semantic gap' for which the lower noun phrase (DP2) provides the value (Akmajian 1979:19). A further notable difference between SCCs and predicational copular clauses is that the former have a restricted information structure: DP2 has to be focused (see Heggie 1988; Heycock and Kroch 2002; Hartmann 2016; Hartmann to appear).

We assume that SCCs are inversion structures (following Heggie 1988; Moro 1991, 1997; Mikkelsen 2005; den Dikken 2006), as sketched in (3), although we depart from these proposals in taking DP1 to be a concealed question (see Romero 2005; Heycock 2012) instead of a predicate (see Hartmann and Heycock 2016, 2017, 2018b, submitted, for more detailed derivations).<sup>4</sup>

(3)



Strikingly, SCCs can show DP1 agreement, as in English, or DP2 agreement as in Italian (Moro 1997):

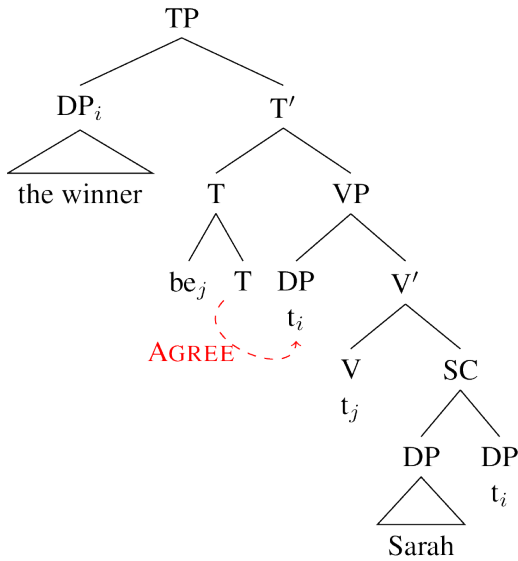
- (4) a. *La causa della rivolta \*è/sono le foto del muro.* ITALIAN  
 the cause of.the riot \*be.3.SG/be.3.PL the pictures of.the wall  
 ‘The cause of the riot is the pictures of the wall.’  
 b. *La causa della rivolta \*è/sono io.*  
 the cause of.the riot \*be.3.SG/be.1.SG I  
 ‘The cause of the riot is me.’

More recently, it has emerged that such variation is also possible within a single language (see Hartmann and Heycock submitted for an overview on Germanic). This is also the case in Dutch and illustrated for number agreement in (5).<sup>3</sup>

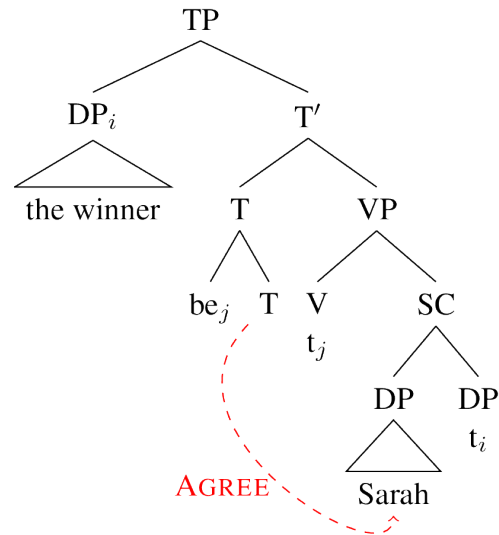
- (5) ... *dat de oorzaak van het ongeluk kapotte remmen %waren/%was.* DUTCH  
 that the cause of the accident broken brakes be.PST.PL/be.PST.SG  
 ‘that the cause of the accident was broken brakes.’

We have proposed that the two different patterns of agreement depend on the landing site of DP1. When DP1 targets a position below the agreement probe (T) this results in DP1 agreement, see (6); when DP1 lands above T, DP2 is the closest goal and gives rise to DP2 agreement, see (7).

(6) DP1 agreement



(7) DP2 agreement



Turning to person agreement in SCCs in Dutch, den Dikken (2014, 2019) claims that Dutch shows a person restriction that looks very similar to the Icelandic DAT-NOM in (1). He claims that downwards agreement in number is possible and obligatory, see (8) (contra what we found, see (5)). If DP2 is non-3rd person, as in (9), however, agreement in person is impossible; “default” agreement is also excluded, so 1/2P pronouns as DP2 are simply ungrammatical (note though that in our own data we found a different pattern, see below):<sup>5</sup>

(8) ... *dat de oorzaak van het ongeluk kapotte remmen* {waren/\*was}

...that the cause of the accident broken brakes were/was

(den Dikken 2019, 3)

(9) a. ... *dat de schuldige ik* {\*ben/\*is}

... that the culprit I am/is

b. ... *dat de schuldige jij* {\*bent/\*is}

... that the culprit you are/is

(den Dikken 2019, 3)

He observes the same for clefts, which are a subclass of SCCs (see Huber 2002; Hartmann 2016).

Ackema and Neeleman (2018) build on den Dikken’s observations on clefts and add that a 1/2P focus is however possible if there is syncretism between the 3SG verb form required by *het* and the form required by the clefted pronoun (possible with modals and past forms):

(10) a. *Het zal ik/jij wel geweest zijn die de whisky gestolen heeft.*

it will I/you.SG well been be that the whisky stolen has

‘It is likely that it was me/you who stole the whisky.’

b. *Het was ik/jij die de whisky gestolen heeft.*  
 it was I/you.SG that the whisky stolen has  
 ‘It was me/you who stole the whisky.’

(Ackema and Neeleman 2018)

In Hartmann and Heycock (2018c), however, we found that there is considerable variation between and within native speakers concerning number agreement in examples like (8). This therefore gives rise to the question of whether there might in fact also be more variation in person agreement than suggested in the works just cited. In order to contribute to a broader empirical basis for the analysis of person agreement, we designed and conducted two experimental studies, reported in the next two sections.

## 2. Production Study

### 2.1 Method and Participants

In the production study, native speakers were asked to fill in a blank in each of a set of test sentences with a verb form, see Table 1 below. The study was implemented and run online using OnExp.<sup>6</sup> Participants were recruited via personal contacts and the mailing list “Onze Taal”; participation was encouraged by a lottery of gift vouchers. 66 self-reported native speakers of Dutch took part. Participants were between 19 and 84 years old (mean age: 58.9).

### 2.2 Conditions and Materials

We tested agreement in five conditions to be able to make the following comparisons. **First**, we wanted to compare production of DP2 agreement for person vs. for number (B/C/E vs. A/D). Note that the Dutch 3PL pronoun is syncretic with the 3SG feminine pronoun (both *zij*), so we had to use non-pronominal noun phrases to instantiate 3P plural DP2s (A/D). **Second**, we investigated the difference between person agreement that is syncretic with 3P agreement (C, *zijn*.1/2/3PL) vs. non-syncretic (B, *bent*.2SG). **Third**, we checked whether including negation affected agreement (A vs. D and B vs. E). Negation further favours the specificational reading by marking the low position of the pronoun, reducing the possibility of a parse where DP2 is in the canonical clausal subject position outside VP (as in the A’-movement cases discussed in Neeleman and van de Koot 2008, 2010).

Condition	DP1	DP2	Clause	Example
A	3SG	3PL	positive	<i>De leraar zegt dat het echte probleem ...</i> the teacher says that the real problem ... <i>...de ouders ____.</i> ... the parents

B	3SG	2SG	positive	... <i>jij</i> ____. ... you.2SG
C	3SG	2 PL	positive	... <i>jullie</i> ____ ... you.2PL
D	3SG	3PL	negative	... <i>niet de ouders</i> ____. ... not the parents
E	3SG	2SG	negative	... <i>niet jij</i> ____. ... not you.2SG

Table 1: Conditions for production study on Dutch SCCs

15 lexical variants of the example in Table 1 were distributed across 5 lists, in such a way that participants saw each condition three times, but always in a different lexicalisation. We added 23 filler sentences of different types. Test sentences and fillers were all constructed in cooperation with a native speaker.

### 2.3 Results and Statistical Analysis

Raw data were coded according to whether or not they expressed DP1 or DP2 agreement per condition. Cases in the test sentences in which participants provided a verb other than the copula, or multiple words were deleted and not considered further. The overall results are tabulated in Table 2. As is evident, participants overwhelmingly produced DP2 agreement.

For the statistical analysis, we calculated percentages of DP1 agreement. We coded DP1 agreement as 1, DP2 agreement as 0, and everything else as missing data. Valid data (1 or 0) were aggregated for each participant (F1) or item (F2) within each condition; the resulting relative frequencies of copulas in agreement with DP1 ( $f$ ) were transformed as usual— $\arcsine(\sqrt{f})$ —and subjected to repeated-measures ANOVAs with participant (F1) or item (F2) as random factor.

Condition	DP1	DP2	%DP2Agr	Description
A	7	197	96.6	3PL-DP
B	6	211	97.2	2SG-pronoun
C	2	146	98.6	2PL-pronoun
D	14	193	93.2	neg-3PL-DP
E	8	213	96.4	neg-2SG-pronoun

Table 2: Frequency of production per agreement type and condition in Dutch SCCs

We computed four contrasts for planned comparisons within the five-level factor condition. First we tested: (i) number agreement vs. (morphologically marked) person agreement (Condition A vs. B); (ii) the role of morphological expression of person distinctions vs. syncretic forms (B vs. C);

and (iii) number mismatch and person mismatch with and without negation (A vs. D & B vs. E). None of the effects are significant, see Table 3.

Contrast		F1 (1,65)	p	F2(1,14)	p
A vs. B	Number vs. person with distinct morphology for person	0.095	0.759	0.143	0.711
B vs. C	Person with vs. without syncretic morphology	1.620	0.208	1.167	0.298
A vs. D	Number mismatch: with and without negation	0.409	0.525	2.497	0.136
B vs. E	Person mismatch: with and without negation	0.317	0.575	0.145	0.709

Table 3: Planned contrasts for DP2 preference in production in Dutch

## 2.4 Summary

In this task participants overwhelmingly produced DP2 agreement, independent of whether or not DP2 is 3rd or 2nd person. There was no effect of person in production, and no effect of syncretism. The lack of variation in Condition A is different from what we found in previous research on number agreement (Hartmann and Heycock 2018c). There are two potential reasons for this that merit further exploration. First, the mean age in this study was much higher than in the previous study. Second, there is a chance that the participants recruited via the email list “Onze Taal” are interested in prescriptive norms, including agreement, as this email list sends out regular newsletters collecting information on language use and also discusses prescriptive rules.

## 3. Rating Study

### 3.1 Method and Participants

The rating study used the thermometer rating task (Featherston 2008), a variant of the magnitude estimation methodology (Bard et al. 1996). Participants are asked to rate the naturalness of a sentence in relation to two reference sentences. These are each provided with a fixed score: one, a rather natural sentence, is assigned the value 30, one, a less natural sentence, is assigned the value 20. Participants provide numerical scores for the test sentences in relation to the two references, one at a time. They can provide values between 20 and 30 but also above and below.

Before the experimental session, participants went through two short practice phases. The first familiarized participants with the task of assigning a relative numerical score by asking them to judge the length of a line in relation to two standard lines assigned the values 20 and 30. In the second, the task was applied to sentences using the same reference sentences as in the actual study.

The study was implemented and run online using OnExp. 86 self-reported native speakers of Dutch



participated. As before, participants were recruited via personal contacts and the mailing list “Onze Taal”. Participants were between 19–78 years old (mean age: 56.2 years).

### 3.2 Conditions and Materials

Again, we were interested in potential differences between number agreement and morphologically marked or unmarked (syncretic) person agreement. Conditions are set out in Table 4. The letters A, B, C indicate the pairs of conditions in the production study that parallel the conditions in the rating study. To these conditions 1-6 we added two more. We added a baseline for 3sg pronouns to get an upper baseline for an SCC with a pronominal DP2 without mismatch in number and person. Additionally, we added a condition in which the verb does not agree in number and person with either of the two DPs. We expected that this condition provides a low baseline, with default agreement being fully ungrammatical in SCCs (see Heycock 2012 for discussion on English). A low baseline helps to differentiate mediocre ratings from clearly ungrammatical one. Additionally, default agreement is frequently considered a last resort option when person agreement fails, and it has been claimed in Bejár & Kahnemuyipour (2017) that we indeed find default agreement in SCCs cross-linguistically (see Hartmann and Heycock 2018a, 2018b as well as Bejár & Kahnemuyipour 2018 for discussion).

		<b>Mismatch in</b>	<b>AgrType</b>	<b>DP1</b>	<b>DP2</b>	<b>Verb Form</b>
1	A	Number	DP1	3SG	3PL (DP)	3SG ( <i>is</i> )
2		Number	DP2	3SG	3PL (DP)	3PL ( <i>zijn</i> )
3	B	Non-syncretic person	DP1	3SG	2SG	3SG ( <i>is</i> )
4		Non-syncretic person	DP2	3SG	2SG	2SG ( <i>bent</i> )
5	C	Syncretic person	DP1	3SG	2PL	3SG ( <i>is</i> )
6		Syncretic person	DP2	3SG	2PL	2PL ( <i>zijn</i> )
7		Num+person	Default	3PL	2PL	3SG ( <i>is</i> )
8		No Mismatch	Baseline for pronoun	3SG	3SG	3SG ( <i>is</i> )

Table 4: Conditions for Dutch Rating

We constructed 24 lexical variants along the lines of (11), similar to the materials for the production experiment. All SCCs occurred in embedded (non-V2) clauses. Additionally, we used negation throughout to favour a reading with focus on a VP-internal DP2. The test sentences were distributed across 8 lists such that each condition was tested three times per list, but always with a different lexicalization. Each questionnaire included 61 filler sentences including 25 “standard items” (see Gerbrich et al. to appear for English), which provide a measure to compare the relative

acceptability with a “standard” scale.

(11) *De leraar zegt dat het huidige probleem ...*

The teacher says that the current problem ...

a. ... *niet de ouders is.*

... not the parents is

b. ... *niet de ouders zijn.*

... not the parents are.

c. ... *niet jij is.*

... not you.2SG is

d. ... *niet jij bent.*

... not you.2SG are

e. ... *niet jullie is.*

... not you.2PL is

f. ... *niet jullie zijn.*

... not you.2P are

g. ... *de huidige problemen niet de ouders is.*

... the.PL current problems not the parents is

h. ... *het huidige probleem niet hij is.*

... the current problem not he is

### 3.3 Results and Statistical Analysis

The raw data were tabulated and prepared for analysis. Ratings of 0 were amended to 1 (the lowest possible rating). Additionally, we deleted two outliers, 230 and 250 to missing value. The resulting scores were z-transformed (including fillers) per participant in order to normalise for the different scales participants might still have used. The overall results (z-scores) are tabulated in Table 5 and Figure 1.

	Rating (zscores)		
	DP1	DP2	DP2 pref
A Number (full DP)	-0.5	0.3	0.8
B Person: 2SG	-0.7	-0.3	0.4
C Person: 2PL	-0.6	-0.3	0.3
Default		-0.8	
fully agreeing pronoun		-0.4	

Table 5: Rating results in SCCs in Dutch

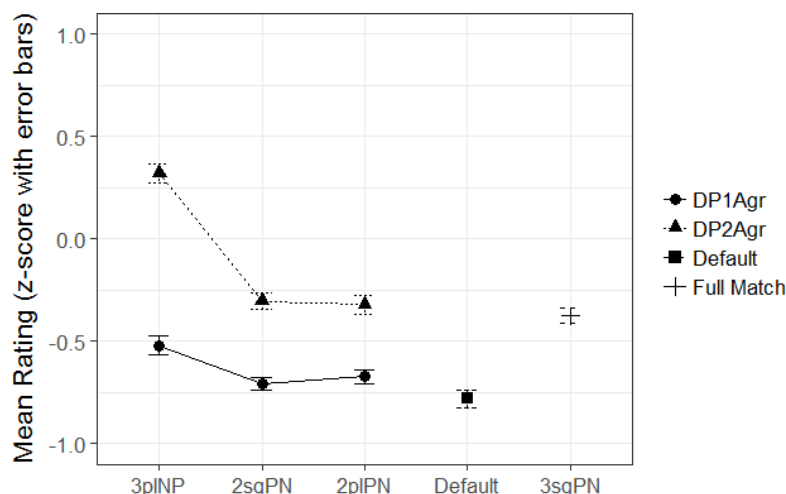


Figure 1: Mean Ratings of DP1/DP2 agreement per configuration

For the statistical analysis, z-scores were aggregated within conditions for each participant (F1) or item (F2). For conditions 1/2, 3/4 and 5/6, we computed the difference between DP1 and DP2 agreement for participants or items by subtracting DP1 z-scores from DP2 z-scores (the greater the difference, the higher the preference for DP2 agreement; negative values indicate a dispreference for DP2 agreement).

In parallel to the production study, we calculated planned contrasts for differences between number vs. person agreement (A vs B/C), and differences between non-syncretic person (2SG) vs. syncretic person (2PL) (B vs. C). As suggested by visual inspection of the graph in Figure 1, the first contrast is significant, see Table 6. That is, the preference for DP2 agreement is stronger with 3PL (non-pronominal) DP2 than with 2SG/2PL pronouns as DP2. As the graph also suggests, there is no difference for syncretic vs. non-syncretic verb form.

	F1 (1,85)	p	F2 (1,23)	p
Main effect of condition	26.3	.000	22.2	.000
A vs. B/C    Number vs. person	45.6	.000	46.1	.000
B vs. C      Syncretic vs. non-syncretic person	< 1	.44	< 1	.57

Table 6: Statistics for DP2 preference (A=2-1, B=4-3, C=6-5) in SCCs in Dutch

Further, the graph illustrates that ratings significantly drop with pronouns, **regardless** of person. The crucial extra data point here is the ratings for Condition 8, the rightmost point in the graph. In this condition, DP2 is a 3P pronoun and there is no agreement mismatch between DP1 and DP2: but the ratings are still remarkably low. The best comparison that we can do to statistically confirm the effect of pronouns is to compare DP2 agreement with a full noun phrase (Condition 2) with Condition 8. The former is rated significantly better than the latter, see C[omparison] 1 in Table 7. As there is no

possible issue with agreement in Condition 8, this drop-off can only be attributed to the effect of a pronoun vs. a full noun phrase as DP2.

Further, there is no difference between the ratings for DP2 agreement with 2P pronouns vs. 3P (C2 in Table 7), or between syncretic vs. non-syncretic agreement with 2P pronouns (C3).

	F1 (1,85)	p	F2 (1,23)	p
Main effect of condition	62.8	.000	43.2	.000
C1: 2 vs. 8    DP vs. pronoun	123.9	.000	75.4	.000
C2: 4/6 vs. 8    2nd vs. 3rd pronoun	2.2	.14	1.03	.32
C3: 4 vs. 6    syncretic vs. non-syncretic 2nd person	< 1	.71	< 1	.86

Table 7: Statistics for absolute difference in rating for DP2 agreement in Dutch SCCs

### 3.4 Summary

Consistent with the production experiment, the rating experiment revealed an overall preference for DP2 agreement in all conditions. In contrast to the production study, however, this preference is larger with 3PL full noun phrases than with 2/3P pronouns. The lack of a person effect in the production study is probably due to the difference in the task. The production task is a forced-choice task, i.e. participants need to choose for either DP1 or DP2 agreement. As DP2 agreement is more acceptable both with full noun phrases and with pronouns, the pronoun effect is not visible in the production study. The difference is visible in the rating study where we are able to compare between preferred as well as dispreferred forms. Finally, we did not find an effect of syncretism, i.e. there is no difference between agreement with 2SG and 2PL pronouns. The striking and important overall observation is that SCCs with pronominal pivots are rated significantly less acceptable than those with DP pivots. That is, our data show a strong pronoun effect, but no additional person effect.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper we have provided new production and rating data on person agreement in Dutch SCCs. The production study shows a strong preference for DP2 agreement in all contexts (2P vs. 3P; syncretic vs. non-syncretic morphology). The rating study shows an overall preference for DP2 agreement, but there is a striking pronoun effect: SCCs with pronouns as DP2 are rated low in acceptability, regardless of person.

To briefly outline the relevance of these data for theories of agreement: First, we have not found that downwards agreement in 1/2P is more problematic than 3P as there is no difference in

acceptability of DP2 agreement between 3P and 2P pronouns, so our data does not support Baker (2008) and den Dikken (2014,2019). Second, despite the fact that the thermometer technique is sensitive enough to pick up differences in degrees of acceptability/unacceptability, we did not find any effect of syncretism, *contra* theories of multiple agreement in SCCs (e.g. Ackema and Neeleman 2018). These two aspects of the data are consistent with our own analysis of how agreement works in SCCs (Hartmann and Heycock 2018a). However, our last finding, the pronoun effect, is a challenge for all theories we are aware of, including ours.

We would like to conclude the paper with some speculation on this last point. Given our analysis of SCCs, an alternative way to describe the facts is that inversion is possible with SCCs in Dutch when DP2 is a full noun phrase, but not when it is a pronoun. We speculate that this may be connected to focus. Dutch, in contrast to German, does not allow the scrambling of objects across the subject (outside of contrastive topic contexts, i.e. A'-scrambling, see Neeleman and van de Koot 2008, 2010). Nevertheless, even in Dutch inversion of non-pronominal DPs is possible in SCCs, so that the strong influence of argument order is not present in this domain. Hartmann (2016) has argued that inversion in SCCs is inherently linked to the assignment of focus to DP2 in a model in which information structure and syntax interact. Now, Dutch might have a different way to express focus than German (related to the scrambling facts), namely that focused elements need not stay in-situ, but that instead the nuclear accents shifts. It is possible then that for pronouns this accent-shift is (strongly) preferred over inversion; how this could be implemented in detail remains for further research.

## Acknowledgments

The work here has been supported by a British Academy/Leverhulme Small Research Grant, which we gratefully acknowledge. We would also like to express our thanks to Marloes Oomen for her help with the materials, to Julia Restle for help with OnExp and the processing of the results, to all the participants in our experiments for their time and trouble, and finally, to the two anonymous reviewers of this paper for close reading and important feedback. All errors remain our own.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For more detail on the interaction with word order, as well as variation in number agreement, see Boeckx (2000), Holmberg and Hróarsdóttir (2004), Sigurðsson and Holmberg (2008), Preminger (2011, 2014), Ussery (2017). For experimental data on the person effect see Hartmann and Heycock 2018a.

<sup>2</sup>Baker (2008) is additionally—in fact primarily—concerned to derive the fact that adjectives, unlike verbs, never agree in person.

<sup>3</sup>Note that we need to distinguish specificational copular clauses, where DP2 is in a low position, within the VP, from cases where a predicate is topicalised, and DP2 is in the canonical subject position. As Dutch V2 structures are in principle ambiguous with respect to this, we discuss agreement in embedded (non-V2) clauses only.

<sup>4</sup>Inversion analyses need an account of how DP1 can move across DP2. Prominent approaches have suggested that DP1 and DP2 are equidistant (see den Dikken 2006), that the movement occurs for information-structural needs (see e.g.

Mikkelsen 2005, or Hartmann 2016), or that DP1 escapes by smuggling and criterial freezing (see Rizzi & Shlonsky 2018). For the movement of DP1 directly to Spec,TP (in DP2 agreement configurations) without the intermediate landing site below TP, it is a precondition that neither the SC, nor the vP headed by *be* are a phase, either because vP is unaccusative or due to phase extension, see e.g. den Dikken (2007).

<sup>5</sup>Den Dikken (2014) provides some additional data with SCCs embedded under *lijken* ‘seem’ with some dative intervention effects; we put these aside here, as these need careful distinction between specification and predication, and control of the presence and absence of the copula and the dative argument.

<sup>6</sup>OnExp was developed by E. Onea at the Göttingen Courant Research Centre *Text Structures* at Göttingen University, see <https://onexp.textstrukturen.uni-goettingen.de>.

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